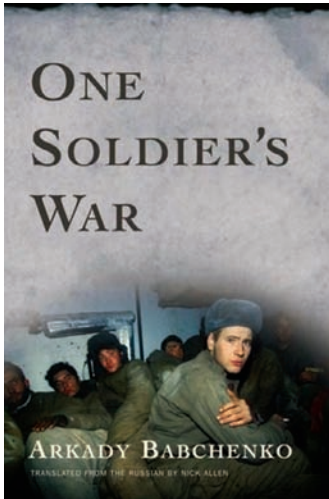


ONE SOLDIER'S WAR

BABCHENKO, Arkady, translated from the Russian by Nick Allen. New York: Grove Press, 2007, hardcover, 396 pages, \$27.50 ISBN-10: 0-802118607

2Lt Mischa E. Kaplan



The ongoing conflict in Chechnya occupies a certain historical void in military studies. The Russian invasion of Chechnya, in 1994 and again in 1999, entered the former superpower into its first major conflict since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian Army had not fought a war of this magnitude since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. And yet, strangely, this conflict has received little attention amongst Western audiences. Although there has been some important work done on the political aspects of the Russian military, little has been written on the social aspects of this organization.¹ The fact that the Chechen conflict has been so catastrophic, in terms of human rights abuses and casualty figures, makes further inquiry into this field imperative. Chechnya, a region still in the grip of conflict, remains a dangerously misunderstood and under-examined battleground.

Thus it should be with a certain excitement that readers approach the English-language translation of Arkady Babchenko's harrowing account of his experiences in the Russo-Chechen wars. Babchenko—who was conscripted into the Russian Army in 1994 and volunteered for active service again in 1999—has given us an account of war that might as well have been plucked right out of the trenches of the Eastern Front during the Great War; the fact that the author is writing about a supposedly 'modern' military in the 1990s makes the story that much more terrifying. Readers hoping to gain a greater understanding of the political nature of the Chechen conflict will find little of interest in this book. Babchenko provides neither a coherent and structured narrative, nor a broad outline of the political actions which brought the Russians into Chechnya. The book's real focus is on the mundane and tragic everyday existence of a conscript soldier in a confusing and morally-nebulous terrain. Through a series of journal-like entries, Babchenko recounts his experiences with garrison life, in the Battle of Grozny, and in countless skirmishes and firefights with Chechen rebels. Although these journal entries were clearly written after Babchenko's demobilization, there is an immediateness to his writing that makes the reader feel a part of this cold and terrible world. Babchenko's literary style is frank and candid, apparently holding back none of the horrors which he routinely faced. From the daily violence that defines life in the ranks of the Russian Army to the grisly deaths of comrades on the battlefield, Babchenko paints an eerie picture of a world devoid of compassion, in which all life has ceased to have clear meaning. Babchenko's world is one in which the callous and apathetic nature of war takes full shape.

While the Chechen rebel looms large and mysterious in Babchenko's narrative, the real enemy in the story is Russian military culture itself. Among the more disturbing aspects of this culture is the practice of *dedovshchina*, the 'bullying' of new recruits by more experienced soldiers. For readers who are familiar with bullying in the Soviet military, Babchenko's stories will provide few surprises. New recruits are routinely and brutally beaten by virtually everyone they come into contact with. From basic training to his first few months as part of a regiment, Babchenko is subjected on a daily basis to malicious and virtually unchecked violence. Even more disturbing is the transcendence of this violence through the ranks. The author notes, somewhat facetiously, that the only reason he was never beaten by a general was simply because he never came into contact with one. Violence is omnipresent. Amongst junior ranks, a group composed primarily of young conscripts, morale is low and

violence and desperation all-encompassing. Desertion is a regular occurrence. The officer corps is equally uninspiring, an incompetent and brutal group which at times appears to place the loss of Russian life as their primary mission objective. These are officers from a bygone era, who still routinely beat those under their command, who without hesitation send troops into situations in which they would never venture themselves, and who place the importance of alcohol far above the safety or well-being of their soldiers. If Babchenko were to hold a mirror up to the Czarist army of 1914, the image would perhaps be little changed. The only real difference in Babchenko's book is that the soldiers are slightly better equipped (but only slightly).

It is difficult to summarize first-hand accounts of war. Personal narratives of conflict and violence are deeply personal and often moving stories of men and women who have been thrust into situations which are often too difficult for the human mind to truly comprehend. Conflict and violence are difficult and complex issues to grapple with, and thus writing about their experiences often becomes a sort of psychological unburdening for veterans of war. *One Soldier's War* is unique in that it does not seem to accomplish this. The book offers little personal insight into the nature of war, perhaps letting its detached narrative speak for itself. There is nothing about *One Soldier's War* that readers will find encouraging or uplifting. Babchenko's world is one in which fear, hatred, and desperation are regular facts of life. As mentioned above, readers hoping to gain an introduction to the Chechen conflict will find little of interest in this book. The real strength of *One Soldier's War* is its insight into Russian military culture, and its unflinching look into the social character and organizational culture of Russia's post-Soviet land forces. Babchenko's book provides a vivid and startling first-hand account of life in the Russian Army, an organization which appears to share much in common with its Soviet and Imperial predecessors. Because so little seems to change in the Russian military, it is safe to assume that the army which recently invaded the Republic of Georgia most likely looks very similar to the army described in this book. *One Soldier's War* provides English-speaking readers with a greater understanding of Russian military culture and the social character of the Russian military; that the book is also able to give readers a small window into the brutal and anachronistic nature of a formidable and supposedly 'modern' military power is testament to Babchenko's important literary accomplishment.

Endnote

1. For a recent exploration of the relationship between the Russian political system and the Russian military, see Zoltan Barany, *Democratic Breakdown and the Decline of the Russian Military* (Princeton, 2007). For an excellent broad overview of the Russo-Chechen conflict, see John Russell, *Chechnya—Russia's War on Terror* (Routledge, 2007).
